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There are a large number of Native American cultures in North America. Each culture is distinct, with its own language, its own history, its own religious institutions, traditions, practices, and beliefs. This diversity and complexity make it difficult to find a starting point for considering Native American religions. Choosing the terminology and categories of any one tradition or those of Western religious traditions as representative prejudices all the consideration of the others. The bias of point of view is unavoidable, yet it is important to be mindful of limitations, potential prejudice, and error. One way in which many traditions map the territories of their own world is with stories of creation. These stories map the world, its values, categories, principles, and relationships. If religion is expressed and practiced through these most basic and defining elements, then the examination of creation stories will reveal important aspects of religion. It is common to refer to such stories as mythology or, more exactly, as creation or cosmogenic mythology. The distinctive marker of these stories, being set “in the beginning,” is not a historical reckoning. It is rather a way to designate events as beyond question and doubt, beyond precedent. Nor does mythology mean false or scientifically false, yet believed by the primitive or unsophisticated. A paper map of a geographical area uses symbols and conventions to indicate ways in which the gross or raw territory can be understood as significant, for example, rainfall, elevation, fuel service stations, cities, populations, temperatures, and so on. Stories of creation or origination can be understood as an important way people of a culture both learn and transmit what is most fundamentally valued.

An extension of this map analogy is that creation stories set the boundaries and terms for many of the other maps held by a given culture. Therefore, creation stories are legends in more than one sense.

The consideration of several examples will show the diversity of ways in which religious principles, beliefs, and practices are mapped by stories of creation.

RELIGION AND THE SHAPE OF THE WORLD

Zuni: The Middle Place

In 1528, the Spaniard Cabeza de Vaca survived a shipwreck near the American shores and wandered over what is now northern Mexico and parts of Texas until 1536, when he was rescued. He recounted stories told to him by Indians about the existence of seven golden cities at a place called Cibola. When this news reached Spain, an expedition was immediately commissioned to seek these golden cities. It was led by Fray Marcos de Niza, who took with him Estéban, the black slave of Cabeza de Vaca. In May of 1539, this expedition succeeded in forcefully claiming one of seven Zuni villages, Hawikuh, for the King of Spain, but in the conquest Estéban was killed by the Zuni, Marcos de Niza reported seeing from a distance another village. The following year, Spanish explorer Francisco Vasquez de Coronado found and captured the same village and named it Granada. Continuing his conquest of the area, he found a total of seven Zuni villages. The golden color of the sunlit adobe did not impress the Spaniards, and Coronado continued to look for the fabled seven cities of gold. This famed first contact with Native Americans in the territory now known as the United States, occurring more than eighty years before the Mayflower sailed, is more than historically important.

While the Spanish did not recognize them as golden cities, to the Zuni the seven villages were not only of a golden hue, but they also embodied meanings fully as precious as was gold to the Spanish.

According to Zuni stories of origin, in the beginning there existed only Awanawlona, an androgynous creator figure, who is conceived as something of a composite of all superhuman beings and is identified with the great vault of the heaven. Awanawlona breathed from his/her heart and created the clouds and waters. With the assistance of other creators, Awanawlona created the universe as it is known to the Zuni. In that first time, “when the earth was soft,” the ancestors of the Zuni lived below the earth surface, in dark and crowded caves. The Sun Father created two sons, war gods. Equipped with rainbows and lightning arrows for transportation, these two descended into the fourth world below the earth surface to bring the Zuni people out to the light of the sun. In Zuni, the word for life, tekohamane, means daylight and the inner stuff of life, tse’makwin, means thoughts and is associated with the head, the heart, and the breath. The Zuni remained near the emergence place where, at intervals of four years, the earth would rumble and other people—the Hopi,
the Navajo, the Mexicans—emerged from the lower worlds. They were, according to these stories, the younger brothers and sisters of the Zuni.²

The instructions given to the Zuni people were to embark upon a journey in search of the “middle place of the world.” Searching for many years they traveled in distinct groups, the original Zuni clans and clan affiliations. Each time the Zuni settled, some disaster destroyed their village and forced them to move on, showing them that they had not yet ended their quest for the “middle place.” Finally the Zuni met an old man who was a rain priest. Their own rain priest prayed with this man and together they caused so much rain to fall that they knew they had found the “middle place.” Any doubts they held were quelled when a water strider came along, spread out its legs, and declared that the middle of the world would be where its heart touched the earth. The location of the Zuni villages were set, one at the place beneath the heart; and one at each place marked by the six feet of the water strider. The esoteric or ceremonial name for the village of Zuni is Itiwana, “the middle.” Enshrined at the most central spot were the ritual objects of the rain priests marking the exact middle of the world. The Zuni conceive of their world as a large island of earth completely surrounded by oceans. Lakes and springs on the island open to an underground water system that interconnects the oceans.

The seven Zuni villages that Coronado found manifested in the land this Zuni archetype. These villages did not survive the Spanish conquest. The present village of Zuni was founded in 1683 and has remained the only Zuni village except for the temporary camps occupied during agricultural seasons near Zuni farms. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that ethnographers began to learn that a seven-part cosmological structure existed in the minds of the Zuni people and that this formed the basic division in the village and social organization of the Zuni. The Zuni consider that their village reflects the structure of the cosmos, the basic shape of which is described as an orientation around seven points—the four cardinal directions, the zenith (above), the nadir (below), and the center. Although the present village of Zuni is not neatly laid out with seven distinct physical quarters, shrines and other physical features replicate this fundamental orienting system enacting a correspondence between Zuni and Zuni cosmology.

The sevenfold pattern is a system of orientation within time and space, defined in such a way that each place is distinguished from, yet related to, all other places. The emphasis is as much on interrelationships as on distinctions. The Zuni people are given distinct roles that are completely interrelated in the terms of place within this sevenfold scheme. Zuni clans are organized into seven groups. Each group, especially those that correspond with the cardinal directions, has distinctions and social roles described in the temporal and spatial terms associated with its place. For example, the Crane, Grouse, and Evergreen-Oak clans are of the north and are associated with winter and with yellow, the color of morning and evening light in the winter as well as the color of the northern auroral lights. The clan symbols are appropriate to the place and its attributes. The crane's flight announces coming winter, the grous changes its color to white in winter, and the evergreen-oak stays green in winter.

This domain has associations with wind, air, and breath as well as with activities that center on war and destruction. Each cardinal direction has a similar pattern of associations.³

The Zuni life is inseparable from the annual seasonal cycle, the orientation of cosmic directions, and the responsibilities and privileges of the clans. The middle place marks the moment of origination and the place where all other divisions come together. The middle place is one of the seven places distinct from, yet related to, the other six places; but it is also a summation, composite, or symbol of the totality. It is the one point common to all other places, to all other distinct places. It is the place where all the others interface and interact as a totality. This middle place is identified with the heart, the center of life. Consequently, the middle place is at once the shrine for the most precious ritual objects, the village (whose name means the middle place), and the structure of the cosmos. The creator deity has this same complex character of being both a distinct deity and a composite of all others. In the terms of the Zuni origin and migration stories, the middle place is that place where life is possible, in contrast with those places that are intolerable or where life cannot long exist.

The Zuni notion of Itiwana, or middle place, corresponds with the organization of the Zuni calendar. The Zuni year is divided into two parts by the solstices, and each part is further divided into six lunar months. The months for each half of the year bear the same names hence both December and June, the months of the solstices, are called l'kopi, which means “turning and looking back,” referring to the action of the sun reaching its farthest point and turning back. During each of these winter and summer solstice months, there is a twenty-day period designated as Itiwana. These middle places in the year are significant times for the celebration and ceremonial marking of a new phase of the year. The making of a new time has the designation of middle place because it denotes the coming together of all the ceremonial societies that, during the remainder of the year, perform separately. It is the temporal grasping of the totality, an act of integration, which gives these twenty-day periods the significance of middle place. The Zuni consider that life itself depends on and proceeds from these middle places in time and space.

Even with this simplified presentation of the Zuni worldview, it is easy to appreciate the rich complexity of the system by which the Zuni place themselves in a way that integrates individual life, clan life, village life, history, and mythology. All human affairs become significant in the terms of their spatial and temporal designations. For the Zuni, the worth of human life is defined by, and evaluated in terms of, orientations in time and space.

For the conquering Spanish, the worth of a person was measured in the amount of gold possessed; for the Zuni, it was measured in terms of the character of the place on which a person stands.⁴

It seems clear that to attempt to understand anything of Zuni religion, or any other Native American religion, without placing it in the context of this broad framework of the cosmology and religious worldview, would severely limit understanding especially from their perspective. One promising approach
to the study of the religions and cultures of other people attempts to discern
the shape of reality as the concrete articulation of spatial and temporal distinc-
tions and valuations in story, ritual, and daily life. This approach suggests an
important place from which to try mapping worlds and religions in some of
the terms of the people involved.

**Seneca: The Creator Twins**

It is common in many Native American cultures to account for the nature of
the world by telling stories of twin brothers whose actions created the world.
One brother, the principal creator, attempts to create a perfect world, a utopia
for human beings. His brother follows along undoing and reversing much of
his brother’s work. The current world is the result of the work of both bro-
thers, each a creator in effect. This type of story is known among cultures all
over North America. The Seneca version is one example.

In the beginning before there was an earth, there was a world in the sky.
In that place, everything was filled with life that radiated from a giant tree
standing in the center of that world. It emitted light half the time and was
dark half the time, thus making day and night for the people. Everything
there was perfect. There was no want for food. Death did not exist. One
family had five sons, and the youngest fell in love with a girl. Feelings of
love made this youth weak, for he longed to marry the girl. They were
married, but he continued to grow weaker. In a dream, he was told that
his brothers should pull up the tree of life by its roots, lest he die. The tree
was to provide for the creation of a new world below, and a young tree
would grow to replace it in this sky world. The brothers did as instructed,
and the tree fell inward into the world below through the hole it had left
in the sky. The youth took his wife to the rim of the hole and while they
were sitting there, the wind from below blew on the woman and impreg-
nated her. The youth knew that his wife was to be mother to the new
world below, so he pushed her off the rim.

Her fall into this new world was eventually broken by a flock of birds
that carried her until they could find support for her, since the world was
only water. Only the big turtle was strong enough to hold her, and he
became the support for the new world. All of the animals dived into the
water to seek earth with which to make the world.5

When the earth was greatly expanded to its present size, the woman
gave birth to a daughter. The daughter approached womanhood, and her
mother forbade her to play in the water. But the daughter did so, and the
water impregnated her with twins. Even in their mother’s womb, the twins
began to fight with one another. When it was time for them to be born,
one brother was born in the normal way, but the other was too eager and
burst a hole in his mother’s side, thus killing her. The grandmother buried
her daughter, and from her body grew corn and other food plants for the
future human beings. She gave the names of *Tanchiawanon*, Good Spirit,
and *Tawiskaron*, Bad Spirit, to the boys.

When the twins grew to manhood, they set out on their tasks. The
Good Spirit made the form of human beings, male and female, in the dust
and breathed life into them. He created the good and useful plants and
animals of the world. He created the rivers and lakes. He even made the
current run both ways in the streams to make travel easy. Meanwhile, the
Bad Spirit busied himself with the creation of annoying and monstrous
animals, pests, plant blight, and diseases for human beings. He introduced
death. He turned the currents in the streams so they would only run one
way. Once he even stole the sun. The Good Spirit tried to reverse these
things, but he was not able to reverse them all.

Finally the twin brothers met at the west rim of the world. The Bad
Spirit was at this time in the form of a giant. They decided to have a con-
test to determine which was the stronger and thus settle their struggles once
and for all. Their chosen task was the feat of moving the Rocky Moun-
tains. The Bad Spirit tried first and was able to move them, but only a little.
When it came time for the Good Spirit to try, he asked his brother to turn
his back to the mountains; then he moved the mountains right against this
brother’s back. When the Good Spirit told him he could turn around and
look, the Bad Spirit bashed his nose against the mountain, and a crooked
nose has characterized his appearance ever since.

The Bad Spirit pleaded with his brother not to kill him. His wish was
granted, but only on the condition that he would serve henceforth to help
take care of human beings. Consequently the Seneca and other Iroquoian
peoples have societies that prepare masks used to impersonate the many
forms of this bad brother; but their ritual acts are aimed at the cure of dis-
ease and the dispersion of witchcraft and other destructive agents.6

As reflected in this story, the Seneca hold an understanding of the charac-
ter of the world and its creation markedly different from the Zuni. Certainly
along with the Zuni, the Seneca (on the basis of this story) value those actions
that conform to expectations. The brother who is born the proper way is the
good brother. The brother who destroys his mother by bursting through her
side in the improper way is a destroyer. The actions of the brothers distinguish
their evaluation as good or bad, while at the same time they set the model for
good and bad acts in human culture. The Seneca cosmology introduces the
idea that even though they violate the rules, they nonetheless contribute to the shape and way of the world, as evidenced by the existence of pests, disease, death, and witchcraft. And the death of the mother
is connected with the origination of staple foods. Instead of the Zuni search
for that middle place where life forces are so delicately balanced that life-
negating forces are nullified, the Seneca embrace those life-negating forces,
imstitutionalizing them in the Society of Faces whose members wear the masks
manifesting malevolent or bad entities, but for the effect of turning them, as in
a mirror, back on themselves. The Society of Faces performs acts on the model
of the Bad Spirit, but they do so in order to cure disease, fight witchcraft, and
remove disorder. Comprehending the Seneca perspective on the power of the
Faces is unlikely without placing them in the framework of the Seneca cosmology and religious worldview.

**Navajo: The Suffering Hero**

Most Navajo stories tell of the heroes who lived in the mythic era after the world was created but before it was inhabited by the Navajo people. Many of these stories center on the adventures of the heroes, the consequences of their failures, and their resulting travail and misfortunes. The stories of heroes must be set in the context of the more pervasive world creation accounts.

Like their Zuni neighbors, the Navajo trace their origins from far beneath the present earth surface. They tell of four and sometimes more worlds stacked one on top of another below this earth-surface world. In these lower worlds, at a time before the Navajo world was given its present shape lived insect and animal people who acted in a manner resembling the present-day Navajo. The stories set in these lower worlds tell of strife, disorder, and confusion. No matter how hard these people tried, they could not stop fighting and committing wrongful acts like incest and adultery. As a result of their actions, each of the worlds on which they attempted to live was destroyed and they were forced to ascend to the next world level to find new places to live. As their forced journey of emergence progressed, the need became more and more urgent for a world in which all living things would know their proper places and live according to rules so that peace would prevail. Still the forces of disorder persisted with the rise of such things as witchcraft, disease, and all sorts of strife. The landscape of these lower worlds bore the barren character of the life patterns followed there.

Finally, fleeing the destruction of the lower worlds in which they lived, the people emerged onto the present earth surface, featureless and covered with water. With help, they succeeded in draining the water and drying the muds and those who had emerged planned that they would give form to this new world through ritual acts, performed first in a sweat lodge and then in a hogan (the name for the Navajo home, also used as a ceremonial place). Pieces of jewell from the medicine bundle of First Man were laid upon the floor to form a painting representing the various things that were planned to exist in the world. Features of the earth were shown, as well as its plant and animal life. Then, in a magical act of prayer, song, and breath, this representation of the world was transformed into the actual world, dinétah or Navajoland. The creation hogan was itself a living form whose support pillars were the creators, whom the Navajo refer to as diyin dine’ei or holy people, who hold up the sky. Though a hogan may appear rude in form and construction, its dome shape and earthen floor bear the basic structure of the cosmos.

The principle of order followed in these acts of creation was one of creating complementary pairs and placing the members across from one another so that they balance on the rim of the emergence place. The world, for example, is bounded by four mountains, which are also perceived as deities. These mountains stand at the four corners of the world, marking the cardinal directions, each having associated attributes similar to those described for the Zuni.

The creation of the earth surface produced a world in which everything was complemented and placed so as to balance on the center emergence place. When complete, the deities identified as the life forms of dawn and evening twilight were sent on a tour of all the mountains to inspect the creation. As they proceeded from one vantage point to another they found everything in place, in Navajo terms, the very definition of beauty (hózhó).

It is this world that Navajo heroes, characters rather like primordial humans, enter, a world in which everything exists in its proper place and with everything delicately balanced on a fulcrum at the center of the world, the emergence place. The heroism of these figures lies in the courage that enabled them to meet the requirement of living and moving about in this world so delicately balanced—for the very living of life leads to a disturbance of this world of beauty and threatens its collapse into chaos. This cosmic drama is reflected in the adventures and plight of these heroes. A brief account will illustrate.

A young man traveling with his family departed by himself for a hunting trip to supply them with food. During his trip, he met a beautiful young woman, and they visited with each other. He became fond of her and spent the night, during which she had sexual contact. She neglected to tell him until later that she was the wife of White Thunder. The next morning, the youth continued his hunt and eventually killed a mountain sheep. He observed that its left horn bore the mark of zigzag lightning, and its left eye was missing. He ignored this omen of the wrath of White Thunder and butchered the animal, preparing to take the meat back to his family. But the sky clouded over, and it began to rain. The hunter took refuge under a spruce tree, keeping his arrows with him for protection. While he waited there, lightning struck the ground all around him. Each time, he heard a voice in the sky say, "He has not yet been struck. He does not lay his arrows aside!" The hunter wondered at this and, curious to see what would happen, he set his arrows against the tree. White Thunder was then able to get past the hunter’s magical protection and in an instant struck the hunter with lightning, shattering him beyond recognition. Nothing was left of him but a streak of blood.

When the hunter failed to return, his family went in search of him. They found out what had happened and were told that only Gila Monster could help them. When they contacted Gila Monster, he demonstrated his powers of restoration by cutting himself up and scattering his various parts broadly about. These parts were gathered together, reassembled, and restored to life, all according to his powers and knowledge. Gila Monster then restored the hunter to life in a ceremonial that used this same knowledge and power. The ritual of restoration served not only to restore life to the hunter, but initiated him into the knowledge and powers of Gila Monster. This heroic adventure then gave origin to the Navajo tradition of ceremonial restoration known as Flintway, one of the ways by which Navajos bring order to a situation threatened by chaos, death, and disease.
This story follows a common scenario for the whole genre of Navajo hero stories. The heroes, invariably in the process of a journey, enter forbidden territories or violate some regulation often unknown to them. As a consequence, they suffer in any number of ways, even to almost complete annihilation. When the heroes are unable to get out of their predicaments, others who possess special powers come to aid and relieve their suffering by performing ceremonies that restore them and also initiate the heroes into specific ritual knowledge.

Whereas the Navajo eras of creation were principally concerned with establishing proper places and relationships among everything in the world, the era of these heroes is concerned more with how one lives in the world. It deals with the boundaries of both places and relationships, with the relationships necessary for life, such as those between hunter and game, between husband and wife and women not his wife, between in-laws, between the living and the dead, between Navajos and non-Navajos, between a person and the plants and animals in the environment, and between human beings and deities. The effect of these stories is to define the Navajo way of life by testing limits and by reinforcing those limits through the adventures of the suffering heroes. The stories also provide insight into the vast and complex system of Navajo ritual focusing on health and healing.

**Stories as Maps of Cultural Values**

Not only Native Americans, but also humans generally, conceive and express the nature of the world as they understand it in the temporal and spatial terms of place or territory. Indeed it is valuation of place—that is, time and space—designations that gives orientation to all cultural and religious forms and sets the terms by which life is meaningfully lived. It is important to see beyond initial confusion and disbelief in what may appear as the fanciful character of Native American stories; for they map the perspectives and worldviews that make each culture distinct.

Notably, in comparing the three examples provided, there are certain similarities but also major distinctions. It is no simple exercise to understand this valuation of place for even one Native American culture. For all three cultures, the character of place takes shape in terms of how the culture is able to resolve the conflicting needs for a clearly defined sense of place—that is, rules and boundaries that define all human actions—and for unbounded freedom unfettered by rules or boundaries. In all three cases, the character of well-defined rules and boundaries is established not by dogmatism, but by acknowledging and often incorporating the creative powers of infringement upon proper place. This violation or infringement is also not confined to some story set in the primordial era of heroes, it has been incorporated into many religious practices and ceremonial performances. Contrary to the way they are often romantically and simplistically presented, Native American views of reality are not static structures in which reality is simply divided, for example, into four parts corresponding with the cardinal coordinates. Reality includes many dynamic and conflicting elements that are inseparable from human life. Native Americans, as people in all cultures, embody the struggle with the nature of human existence both in the content and form of their stories and through their rituals and ordinary ways of life.

**THE TRICKSTER**

While stories set “in the beginning” deal with fundamental values, categories, and relationships, so too, yet in markedly different ways, do stories about disruption, violation, and chaos. These stories explore the consequences of chaos and disorder, or simply a world without design. The human desire to be free of rules, to be unbound by time, space, or society, is dramatically and often humorously played out in many Native American cultures in the stories of a character commonly referred to as the trickster. This figure is practically unnamable and undefinable. With a possible exception of being almost invariably male, his character is free of any of those restricting elements that give something definition and thus a name. It seems that the only dependable characteristic for the trickster is that he defies clear definition. In many Native American cultures, the trickster takes the form of a coyote, but a very unusual coyote. In some cultures, he has no particular form and can transform himself into any number of appearances. He is, in any case, the subject of numerous stories told throughout native North America, and this figure must be considered in terms of the valued distinctions of place and territory. Trickster stories are told much more often than stories of the creation of the world and they usually include children as well as adults in the audience. Clearly, for many Native Americans, trickster stories introduce and define elements of the worldview.

The flavor of trickster stories is shown in the well-known story of Eyetjuggler. One Cheyenne account goes like this:

There was a man who could send his eyes out of his head to a limb of a tree, and they would come back when called. Trickster ("White Man" is the Cheyenne name) wanted to do this, and he learned how from the man. But he was warned that he could do it no more than four times in one day. Trickster liked to do this because of the vantage he gained, but he paid no attention to the warning. One day when he sent his eyes out for the fifth time, he sent them to the highest tree he could find; but when he called them to return, they didn’t. He called and waited and called and waited, but they didn’t come back. Flies gathered on them as they started to spoil.

Trickster lay on the ground unable to see and waited for something to happen. Soon a mouse approached and crawled on Trickster to snap a piece of hair for its nest. Trickster was thus able to catch it and force it to lead around. The mouse pleaded to be released but wasn’t let go until it gave Trickster one of its eyes. Trickster could then see, but the mouse’s eye was so small that it went far back into Trickster’s eye socket.
Trickster then saw a buffalo grazing nearby. He told the buffalo his trouble and began to cry. The buffalo pitied him and gave him one of its eyes, but it was so large that it wouldn’t go into Trickster’s eye socket.

This story is told many ways and can be made to apply to innumerable specific incidents, but there is a general lesson taught through the trickster’s experience: one suffers the consequences of ignoring restrictions or rules. In other trickster stories it is his sexual urges that remain unbounded. The Winnebago tell a story of a trickster who had such a long penis that he had to carry it coiled up in a box on his back.

One day he went down to a lake and saw a number of girls swimming on the opposite shore. Attempting to use the advantage of his long penis, he dispatched it across the lake, but it tended to float. After several attempts at weightening it with rocks so it would go at the proper depth, he successfully lodged it in the chief’s daughter. Various people were called to try to help the girl get free of this thing, but they didn’t know what it was and couldn’t help her. Finally an old woman was found who knew the ways of Trickster. She stood astride Trickster’s penis and gouged it with an awl. Trickster pulled his penis back so quickly that the old woman was thrown a great distance.

A plains version of this story places Trickster across a prairie from the women. The resolution comes when a herd of buffalo stampede between Trickster and the women, cutting his penis to its present size. The trod-upon pieces were then transformed into the animals of the prairie.

The utopian urges expressed in Trickster—his urges to be unbound and without limitations—often deal with food, for his appetite is insatiable and he never works for what he eats. This is featured in a Menomini story of a trickster.

Two blind men were moved across the lake from the rest of the people where they might be safer. They were provided with food, and a rope was stretched from their lodge to the lake so they could find their way to the water. Raccoon came by one day and watched what was going on. Each day one blind man would cook while the other went for water, and the next day they would trade jobs. Their food looked good to Raccoon, so he played a trick on them in order to get some. When it was time to eat, one blind man started to cook the meat while the other went for water, but Raccoon had moved the rope from the lake and tied it to a bush. The blind man who went for water returned distressed by the fact that the lake had dried up and that they would die without water. Raccoon then replaced the rope, and when the other blind man went to try finding water, he found the lake and got water. While this was taking place, Raccoon placed himself in the lodge and waited for the meat to be cooked. Eight pieces were prepared and placed between the two blind men. Raccoon took four and started eating them while he watched what happened. Each of the blind men began to accuse the other of taking more than his share, and when their tempers were at a high pitch, Raccoon slapped them both in the face, thus making each think that the other had done it. While they rolled about fighting, Raccoon took the rest of the food and laughed out loud as he left. The men stopped fighting when they realized what had happened, and Raccoon told them they should learn not to find fault with each other so easily.

An Apache version of this story concerns Coyote and two blind women. It ends with Coyote inflicting a cruel death on the two women.

Trickster is an important figure in the oral traditions of many Native American people. From these several examples it is perhaps clear why Trickster embodies the human struggle against the confinement felt by being bound to place, even within the obvious necessity of such definition in order to prevent chaos. In many of his adventures, Trickster permits people to vicariously experience the thrills and freedoms of a utopian existence. But his folly reveals the very meaning of the boundaries and relationships between bounded places that give order to human life. Undoubtedly, the fun and exciting, even gross and risqué, aspects of these stories contribute to their attractiveness and effectiveness, but it is certainly clear that, to Native American people, these stories have far more significance than simple entertainment, the status consigned to them by most interpretive studies.

**STRUCTURES OF REALITY**

**IN ARCHITECTURE AND ART**

The temporal and spatial distinctions people of any culture use to construct and negotiate their world are usually easily discernable in Native American cultures. Stories provide natural language articulation of these valued distinctions but they are also made in other cultural forms. They are found in social structure, in mythic geography, and in architecture. The village of Zuni replicates the cosmic pattern, as do the Navajo hogans and ancestral lands. In many Native American cultures landscapes, villages, ceremonial grounds, ceremonial lodges, and common homes replicate the form and process of their world. An unfortunate tendency among observers of Native American cultures, including scholars, has been to collapse the many distinctive cultural value systems imprinted on categories and relationships articulated in terms of place, to a single oversimplified pattern, usually a sacred circle, presented as common to all Native American cultures. This is not accurate.

The appreciation of the complexity of the cosmic symbolism that can be borne by architectural forms is enhanced in a brief examination of the significance of the temporal and spatial organization of the Delaware/Lenape Big House. The term Big House refers both to a ceremonial and the structure in which it takes place. From the Delaware/Lenape point of view, the religion of the Big House stems from the origin of the world, and they feel that all other religions have emerged from it.
CHAPTER TWO

The lodge is built with four walls covered by a partial roof open in the center, through which extends the center pole erected in the lodge floor. The lodge bears cosmic symbolism in its equation of the floor with the earth, the walls with the four quarters of the world, and the roof with the vault of the sky. On the center post is carved the face image of mesi’ngoko, the creator and supreme power. The lodge centers on this figure, as does the religion. The pole rooted in the earth pierces the sky through the twelve levels that form the abode of mesi’ngoko. He holds the top of the pole in his hand. Faces carved on the support pillars on each wall represent the manitous, or spirits, of these cosmic regions.

The lodge has doors on the east and west that are associated, respectively, with the rising sun, symbol of the beginning of things, and the setting sun, symbol of the end of things. Beneath the earthen floor are the underworlds.

The prescribed ritual order of movement in the lodge requires entrance through the east door, movement in a circular direction to the north around the center pole, and exit through the west door. This movement pattern represents the cycle of life, the white path. Within the lodge are specified places for people in the three clan groupings—wolf, turtle, and turkey—and for the men who sit apart from the women.

The Big House ceremony ritually enacts transit through the year. It transpires over twelve nights, representing the twelve moons or lunar months of the year. The dancing that follows the white path symbolizes the east-to-west movement of the sun as well as the passage of life from birth to death.

This is but the most simple description of the valued place distinctions of the Big House religion of the Delaware Lenape. It is carried out in much greater detail and throughout the many smaller elements of the ritual dress, face painting, ritual paraphernalia, and ritual procedures.

Importantly, the distinctive designation of place categories and relationships is the way the people of cultures create and negotiate reality. To be of a culture, to hold specific personal and cultural identity, is to know one’s place, to know the territory.

Throughout native North America, cultural and religious values are also introduced through the artwork that is so intricate a part of clothing, utensils, masks, drums, and ritual objects. The well-known medicine pipe of the Sioux and other people bears the symbols of the plants, animals, birds, various domains of the universe, seasons, and history of the people, all of which are brought together with their counterparts in the spiritual world in the prayerful act of smoking the pipe.

Through the aesthetic works of artisans a vision of the world held by Native Americans can be seen. The old tradition of Eskimo carving, done before the advent of tourist curio markets, was a process in which, in their terms, the carver (and all Eskimo men were carvers) saw and revealed the form that lay within the uncarved materials. The carver would hold the unworked piece of ivory, turning it in his hands, contemplating it until he could see what form lay within it. Carving was not considered to be a process of the artist conquering or commanding the raw materials to conform to his ideas. Rather it was a process of releasing the form already resident in the material.

Evidence of this view is apparent in a dialogue between two contemporary Pacific Northwest Coast craftsmen, Bill Holm and Bill Reid, as they consider some old pipes. Reid speaks of the wood-carving process as being driven by a “crazy mystique of the object inside the wood.” Holm agrees with this, “The artist has to see that form in there.” Reid then says that the craftsman must have “the courage to take it [the carving] beyond the point your mind tells you is logical.” This view of reality, that sense of the shape of things, is not only in the visual objects, it is also a part of the process by which these objects are created. The process is not one of dogmatically applying form or structure to raw material or of consciously creating symbols to stand for one’s ideas. It is an interrelational process of seeing that the principles and forms of reality, that is, the intentionalities these forms embody, are already present in all things, even in an uncarved piece of ivory or wood, even in the most common, everyday things.

COSMICIZATION OF THE ORDINARY

Religion, the religious, is often considered beyond or other than the ordinary. Religion occurs on holidays or Sundays and in special places. Yet, religion is also lived and practiced at the most banal levels of life. Lame Deer was a wily old Ogala when he and his white friend Richard Erdoes engaged in composing his biography. He had lived his long life during the most difficult period in the history of the people of the northern plains, a period characterized by the constant threat of complete collapse and loss of cultural identity. This did not greatly embitter Lame Deer, although he liked to take advantage of aspects of his culture to point up its richness against what he felt was the impoverished condition of European-American culture.

In a conversation with Erdoes, Lame Deer explains how the most common objects may reflect grand cosmic principles. It is a kind of meditation on a soot-covered cooking pot.

What do you see here, my friend? Just an ordinary old cooking pot, black with soot and full of dents.

It is standing on the fire on top of that old wood stove, and the water bubbles and moves the lid as the white steam rises to the ceiling. Inside the pot is boiling water, chunks of meat with bone and fat, plenty of potatoes.

It doesn’t seem to have a message, that old pot, and I guess you don’t give it a thought . . .

But I’m an Indian. I think about ordinary, common things like this pot. The bubbling water comes from the rain cloud. It represents the sky. The fire comes from the sun which warms us all—men, animals, trees. The meat stands for the four-legged creatures, our animal brothers, who gave of themselves so that we should live. The steam is living breath. It was water, now it goes up to the sky, becomes a cloud again. These things are sacred. Looking at that pot full of good soup, I am thinking how, in this simple
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manner, Wakan Tanka takes care of me. We Sioux spend a lot of time thinking about everyday things, which in our mind are mixed up with the spiritual... We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one... We try to understand them not with the head but with the heart, and we need no more than a hint to give us the meaning.

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Meaningful visual patterns commonly appear in Native American art, architecture, songs, prayers, stories, and ritual processes. One of these motifs related to the Navajo example presented earlier can be explained.

Recall that in Navajo hero stories there is often tension between a static, balanced order that characterizes the state of perfect beauty and the necessary disruption of that order and beauty as a part of the life process. The dynamic character of that tension is reflected in the iconic motif of the incomplete circle, which is ubiquitous in Navajo culture. Its most common incidence is as a circular enclosure with an opening or doorway, as in the Navajo hogan and sweatlodge. It appears in both the design and coil construction of Navajo baskets, in the incised design that encircles the neck of Navajo pottery jars, in the pathway or opening in the border designs of Navajo weaving, and in the encircling guardian of a sandpainting. Movement within a hogan, especially during ceremonies, occurs in a pattern that prevents complete or closed circles.

The open circle nonetheless constitutes a boundary. It sets off a space and gives it significance. The break or opening that is the most distinctive aspect of the motif serves in a pragmatic sense as an orientation device. That position is the one to be aligned with the east or to define the direction east. It is the point to which all other points are related. But at another level, Navajo people consider the opening as a pathway leading out of the enclosed space. It is always seen as the road out, and this road is the road of life. Navajos say that to draw a closed circle around someone's house will cause sickness, perhaps even death because it is an obstruction of the out-going life road.

A Navajo funerary custom uses this motif to articulate Navajo values. If a person dies in a hogan, the body is not carried out the door, for carrying it along the road of life would be highly inappropriate. Consequently, the body is removed through a hole knocked in the north side of the hogan. This also ruins the house for any further habitation. It is abandoned and avoided.

This iconic motif of the open circle visually bears the concepts central to those stories. These concepts can be summarized as follows: The world was created in perfect beauty, but perfect beauty means a static order. Because life is a dynamic process requiring movement, it risks destroying this beauty. So as disorder arises and life is threatened, one must be able to reconstitute order and beauty in the world. This is done by the ritual re-creation of the pattern of perfect beauty.

The Navajo way of life is a process of moving from a domain of perfect beauty into history, the threat of chaos motivates a return to ritual in order to achieve re-creation and renewal. Navajo life can be portrayed as a pathway out of the domain of the perfect beauty of fresh creation into history, into the profane world. But it also provides a way in which even disorder and the threatening aspects of life may be seen as meaningful, real, and necessary. The pathway through the opening in the circle shows that the space inside and the space outside, the time of story and the time of humans in history, the world of beauty and order and the world of ugliness and disorder, are intimately interdependent.

It shows that the cosmic processes occur in the individual and that the sufferings of the individual are part of cosmic processes. The ubiquitous open circle represents and enacts this fundamental element in the Navajo worldview.

CONCLUSION

This chapter shows that an important approach to understanding any aspect of Native American religions is to comprehend as fully as possible the culture's worldview, that broadest framework which gives shape not only to the whole of reality, but is also used to negotiate the exigencies of every aspect of mundane life. Evidence of this worldview can be found most immediately in stories, especially stories that tell of the creation of the world—for in the process of creation, the world is given its broadest order and shape. Since everything in the material world has the culturally designated attributes of time and space, anything can bear these marks of cultural value. Literally, anything can be a symbol of a culture's understanding of the shape of reality or some aspect of it.

The examples presented also show that no generally applicable Native American view of reality exists and that the many diverse views are complex and sophisticated. It is especially important to see that Native American views of reality are not at all static. Among the examples considered, none express the view that religious and cultural significance is limited to a rigidly defined place. Native American worldviews often bestow a certain creative power and therefore place, within even religious practice and belief to the acts that violate order. Hence disease, death, trespass, witchcraft, and the like are all matters of religious significance even though they are not given a positive value. The Seneca Bad Spirit, the trickster, the trespassing Navajo heroes all are vitally important to the articulation of a valued reality. Consequently, they are meaningful religious figures. They embody the struggles and dynamics of being human.

NOTES


2. See the following for the creation mythology of the Zuni: Ruth L. Bunzel, "Zuni Texts," *Publications of the American Ethnological Society* 15 (1933); Frank H. Cushing, *Outline of
Among the Omaha, it was a custom at the funeral of a highly respected man or woman for several youths to make two incisions in their upper left arms which they kept open by inserting a willow twig. With blood dripping from their wounds, as an expression of their grief, they danced before the lodge that housed the dead and sang songs with binthe major cadences suggesting birds, sunshine, and lightness. This practice bears the Omaha belief that song is capable of carrying human thoughts and aspirations beyond the human world. The songs of the youths cheer the dead as he or she goes into the world beyond.1

Native Americans commonly view songs, prayers, stories, and other oral events as manifesting powerful forces. Certain words when spoken or sung affect the world, give it shape and meaning. Words can cause pain and suffering as well as create beauty and orderliness.

In several Pueblo stories of creation, the first figure to exist—who, in a sense, has always existed—was Thought-Woman. The world was literally formed as she thought what form it should take. Her partners in creation followed her act of creative thinking by naming those things given form by Thought-Woman. Thus, her acts of creation became humanly meaningful through language. Names gave distinction and identity to the forms created.2

In Central California, thought and speech are personified as the cosmic creators. Many of the creation stories feature a figure who creates the world as he thinks of it or speaks about it. This figure is countered by Coyote, a sort of trickster, whose acts undo or reverse the way the world is created. In this way,